

Setting the Scene for the New Testament

We have seen what the prophets of old have told us. We have looked through their eyes to see the vision that God shared with each of them. Though these prophets were denied by their own people in their own time, their preaching left an imprint on the Jewish mind and culture, one that was sustained long after they were gone. These promises and declarations made by God's prophets impacted what would become the Jewish people during the rule of Rome.

After being set free from captivity under Persian rule, the Jewish people, led by Ezra and Nehemiah, went to restore Jerusalem. Under duress, the temple and wall were finished. Eventually, Palestine came under Greek rule (as prophesied by Daniel). Alexander the Great quickly overtook the known world all the way to India. After his early death in 323BC, his empire divided. Palestine was fought over by Alexander's remaining generals in a power struggle. The Greeks' overarching goal was to spread their culture to the lands they conquered. Only the Jewish people rejected this foreign influence into their religious beliefs (though clearly not all Jews did so). Antiochus Epiphanies persecuted the Jewish people heavily for over ten years for this very reason. He burned their writings and settlements and killed their people. This resulted in the Maccabean revolt (167BC) in which Judas Maccabeus and his followers violently took control of Jerusalem and set up a local government. It actually lasted for a while, too. You can imagine that Judas became a popular name among newborn Jewish males.

When Rome rose to power, they were a little smarter. They let the local regions police themselves to an extent. This helped relations between Rome and the conquered peoples. They entered Palestine in 63BC. A leader, Antipater, rose up and was one of the first to deal and negotiate with Rome. He was declared the procurator in 47BC. Many Jews were uneasy with this situation. They felt that any form of cooperation with their overlords was traitorous to their nation, and ultimately to God. Herod "the Great" was the son of Antipater. He declared Herod to be the governor in 40BC. It took Herod three years finally to subdue his Kingdom from Jewish and foreign resistance. Though he gave them a lavish temple (and the jobs to build it), he ruled the people harshly and with much bloodshed. Years later, in 30BC, he was declared the King of Judea by Octavian Augustus (the nephew of Julius Caesar). If his violent tactics were not enough to have caused them to dislike Herod, the Jewish people had another. He was only a half-Jew. He was an Idumean (Edomite). From this quick description of the events between Malachi and Matthew, we can gain a little perspective of the long, harsh treatment the Jewish people have received and the mood of the New Testament. This was the attitude that was in the air – resentment and distrust.

During this time, the devout religious leaders of the Jewish people had created the beginnings of the religious structure we can still see today in Orthodox Judaism. There are three "classes" of law: the Law of Moses, the oral law, and the "saying of the rabbis." The oral law was deduced from the Mosaic Law by rabbis over the centuries. This was open to argument and debate; however, it was to be formal and without disgrace. When Jesus combatted the Pharisees (the keepers of the law), it was against this oral law. Jesus argued and debated the oral law with the Pharisees. The "sayings of the Rabbi's" were simple "do's and do not's." These three classes were beyond reproach and blaspheming. Ultimately, the Sanhedrin (the Jewish "tribunal" or court leadership) was also beyond reproach. Even later Sanhedrins could not overturn previous decisions! Precedent meant everything.

Jesus' biggest influence to Jewish society and religiosity can be seen in the New Testament by what the Pharisees disregarded and overlooked - morals and motives. Jesus held a person's morals and motives on equal par with the law. The Pharisees declared that these motive teachings had no binding authority whatsoever. Obviously, we can see this feeling and believing to be very important to the Christian faith. Jesus' motives were just as important to him - if not more important - than his works. I think in the New Testament we can easily see that this is Jesus' chief concern with the Pharisees: their dismissal of moral guidance, and a corrupted application of the law.

By now, you might be wondering why this is important. It is all a question of context. We understand Jesus to be (have been) a revolutionary. But, he was a revolutionary in regards to what? Was Jesus a feminist revolutionary? Don't laugh; there are certain people who believe that and try to use the Bible to support it. And to whom was Jesus a revolutionary? Was it to an upper-middle class Caucasian suburb? Again, don't laugh! We have to look at Jesus in his own setting and fully to understand him there before we have a chance to import him into our own setting in order to find meaning in our lives from him.

So, we have a general picture of the struggle of the Jewish people and some of the things for which Jesus stood. Now, let us take a quick look at other socioreligious groups during the time of Jesus.

The Pharisees are talked about a lot in the New Testament. They were Jesus' chief opposition. They were the keepers of the Law. They believed that the law was the purest and highest form in which to worship God. Make no mistake about it; worshipping God was their highest desire. They found their beginnings in the previously mentioned Maccabean revolt. They resisted the Greek ideas and held up the Scriptures as their defense. They created an oral law to prescribe better how (to every detail) they were to obey the Mosaic Law. Often times, this oral law went well beyond the Mosaic Law, so the people would not come anywhere close to breaking the Mosaic Law.

The Sadducees were the Jewish aristocracy. They were "buddy-buddy" with Rome. They also were pretty much in charge of the temple and its functioning. (Remember that Herod, the King whom Rome declared, renovated and glorified the temple). They did not agree with the oral law on principal. They felt that the books of Moses (the first five of our Bible) and the temple were all one needed to worship and live. Oddly enough, as a result of their reliance on only the Torah, they did not believe in the existence of angels or the resurrection of the dead (as these ideas were most clearly set forth in Scriptures outside the Torah). This censorship was their way to keep out hostile ideas, chiefly Greek ideas.

Now, let us go on to the Essenes. This group, you might not have heard of; yet, they are very important. This was a community devoted to ritual purity and prayer. The New Testament never mentions them; however, the writings found at Qumran tell us a lot about them. They formed their own community in response to the corruption of the temple and the world and owned all things in common. They understood that purity was something God desired; however, they isolated themselves as a result. They shared very apocalyptic views concerning the Kingdom of God. Jesus has more than a few beliefs in common with the Essenes. Some scholars believe that these writings represent more than just the sect of the Essenes, but a more mainstream Jewish belief.

The fourth group is the Zealots (like Simon of the twelve disciples). These can be likened to terrorists. They were convinced the right way to get back their land, nation, and pride was through military force and violence. They trained assassins and planned revolts. (The revolt in 66AD was their doing.) They thoroughly despised the idea that they were captives in their own land.

We know that Jesus did not join any of these groups. We know that in the New Testament, he advocated following the Law, which the Pharisees agreed with. Yet, at the same time, they had heated debates about what exactly the Law meant. Obviously, this got him on bad terms with the Pharisees. He also had respect for the temple. (After healing people, he often sent them to sacrifice at the temple.) This, the Sadducees could respect. Yet, he also pronounced judgment on that very temple (much like Jeremiah the prophet). He also stood against Roman rule, which would have made the Sadducees uneasy. Jesus found his closest ally in his cousin John the Baptist. They had a similar worldview, as we will see in future articles. Along with the Essenes, they earnestly believed that God would intervene in the course of human history to usher in the Kingdom of God. This would have put Jesus at odds with the Zealots, who would have rather brought the Kingdom themselves through force - they did not want to wait. However, because of this Kingdom, Jesus

sent forth laborers into the world, thereby disagreeing with the Essenes' view of withdrawal from the world. Yet, Jesus wants us to be pure from the world at the same time. This gives us a good handle on the "positions" of Jesus and other groups within the Jewish society during his time. You can see this is not entirely simple!

With this background knowledge about the Jewish history, their ideas, and their factions, we can tackle the New Testament in its historical context. By understanding what Jesus' words meant to those Jewish people in the first century, we can begin to gain meaning from them in our 21st century.